

Committee on Resources

resources.committee@mail.house.gov

[Home](#) [Press Gallery](#) [Subcommittees](#) [Issues](#) [Legislation](#) [Hearing Archives](#)

Chairman Dallas Massey's Testimony

before the Subcommittee on Forests

and Forest Health Hearing

Flagstaff, Arizona

Friday, March 7, 2003

CRISIS ON THE NATIONAL FORESTS -

CONTAINING THE THREAT OF WILDLAND FIRE

TO THE ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNITIES

Thank you Chairman and members of the committee for inviting me to provide testimony at this hearing. I am honored and pleased to be able to share a few words with you today, and I hope we can develop a better understanding of wildfire impacts and better methods to protect our forests and our communities.

As Chairman of the White Mountain Apache Tribe in eastern Arizona, my people and I, have, unfortunately, gained a great deal of first-hand knowledge about the threats and impacts from wildfire. Our reservation, containing more than 1.6 million acres of Tribal trust land, was the site of the devastating Rodeo-Chediski Fire which broke out last summer, consuming nearly one-half million acres of forest land. Of that amount, more than 276,000 acres destroyed by fire were within our Tribal lands.

Today, more than six months after the outbreak of the fire, I am here to tell you about our experiences learned in the Rodeo-Chediski Fire, to describe for you the impacts it has had on our land and our people and our economy, and to offer our suggestions, along with the other valuable comments you will hear today, about what we can do together to respond to the threat which remains with us this year and for years to come from the threat of uncontrolled wildfires in our precious forest lands.

Our learning experience from the Rodeo-Chediski Fire began June 18, 2002, which for us White Mountain Apache was a day that changed our lives. On that day, looking to the west on our reservation from my own community of Canyon Day, we could see smoke billowing up like a dark thundercloud in the sky. We knew that the long dry spell had caught up with us and that we would be in for a major fire. We had battled forest fires before; for us Apache, fire is a way of life and it is regarded in our culture as a teacher. But we soon learned that this fire was very different. Within a matter of hours it grew beyond all control and expectation on its march to become the largest fire in Arizona history and one of the largest in recorded history in the western United States.

Within several days of its outbreak, the Rodeo Fire had merged with a new fire on the west side, the Chediski Fire and quickly became a threat to our lives, our communities, and our livelihood. The combined fires forced the evacuation of communities all along the northern boundary of our Tribal lands. Our effort to fight the fire and to cope with the evacuations and emergency planning consumed our people 24 hours a day. My memory of that time is a blur of endless meetings, telephone calls, and planning and replanning to coordinate scores of work teams and equipment which were dispatched in every direction. When the fire was curtailed and people could begin to return to their homes and their jobs, more than \$50 million had been spent in fire fighting and well more than 4,300 personnel, in addition to countless volunteers, had been assigned to the fire.

As the fire was brought under control and drew to a close, we learned the devastating impact from the fire.

On our lands two primary watersheds in mountainous terrain had been scorched from flames, creating ongoing damage from erosion and flooding. It is estimated that more than 400 million board feet of timber from our commercial forests were destroyed, in addition to the damage and disruption to the variety of plants and animals which inhabited the 276,000 acres of burned land within our reservation.

Now, some six months after the fire has come through our lands, we have gained knowledge and experience and a degree of frustration and sorrow from what we have seen and what we have learned. For us each day we are faced with the task of recovery. This means recovery from the fire's effects on our lands and its effects on our homes, our jobs, and our future. Recovery for us is a full-time job. It will occupy future planning for our Tribe for years to come; and to guide our steps to recovery, we look to what we have learned from the fire and its impacts on our lands.

Some of what we have seen and learned has been very gratifying and promising. We have seen that our forestry management work made a significant difference in the fire and we understand better the need to continue the prescribed burning and the thinning which was occurring in some areas of the Rodeo-Chediski Fire. The maps which have been prepared through our BIA Agency Forestry Office show that when the Rodeo-Chediski Fire approached areas of our forest which had been treated through burning or thinning within the past ten years, the fire intensity dropped and became a healthier fire. The fire dropped from a crown fire to a surface fire, leaving healthy trees intact to survive and to provide seed for a future forest. As you can see from the maps and photos, there is a very dramatic and direct correlation between areas of treatment and areas of little or no serious fire damage.

In contrast, in the untreated areas, the fire was highly destructive and in many places, sterilized the soil. Again, the map shows high fire damage where there were no treatments or treatments in the recent past. The lesson is that multiple treatments at regular intervals will make the difference between catastrophic fire and a potentially healthy fire. In addition, a wildfire which breaks out in a treated area burns much less intensely and is much much easier for crews to control and manage. This is what allowed crews to contain and control the eastern flank of the fire in Cottonwood Canyon. The result will be much less destruction to the forest base and much less risk to private property and homes adjacent to forest lands from the threat of wildfire. We have seen this same pattern in earlier fires within our reservation, such as the 1999 Rainbow Fire, which abruptly stopped where it reached a pre-treated area near Cradleboard School.

Our fire also taught us some lessons about the recovery and rehabilitation work that is needed in the forest after a catastrophic wildfire. The Rodeo-Chediski Fire burned through a portion of our forest which had previously been burned in 1971 in the Carrizo Fire. We were able to salvage the destroyed trees in some areas, which removed fuel for the Rodeo-Chediski fire and resulted in lower fire severity. In the unsalvaged areas, our forestry officials found that when the Rodeo-Chediski Fire reached the perimeter of the old Carrizo Fire, the dead timber, along with additional fuels provided from brush and new growth, accelerated the fire and it burned with an even greater intensity. This experience shows that active management steps before a fire can ensure that the risks from runaway fires are minimized and action following a fire in the burned area can reduce impacts 30 years later. If we pull together now, we can utilize this knowledge to plan for our future and return our forests to a healthy condition and a fire-safe condition.

For us Apache people, our land is our home. As a people, we draw our identity and our culture from our land. In my language, the term shii ne' is the word we use to describe our land and it is also the same word we use to describe our mind. So, our land and our mind are integrated and in that way we truly are a people who are tied to and are of our land. So for us, the terrible destruction to our forest land is a loss of ourselves and who we are. That is why our recovery work must move forward and must be fully completed to bring healing to our land and to our people.

Unfortunately, for our Tribal government with limited resources, we are struggling to meet the challenges for this recovery, especially after experiencing the devastating economic setback from the fire. This has left the Tribe with even greater challenges to improve the livelihood of its people, many of whom are now at risk for layoff and job closures due to the loss of the commercial forest on the west side, and at a time when our Tribe is struggling economically to get back on its feet following the fire.

In conjunction with the BIA we have received funding for recovery for our lands through the Emergency Stabilization and Rehabilitation (ESR) process, formerly known as BAER, but we know that our recovery needs will extend much beyond the three year extent of ESR funding and will need much greater scope and attention than the preliminary soil stabilization and limited tree replanting, which is the focus of the recovery plan. For example, we estimate it would take over 150 years of recovery and growth before we will, once

again, have a commercial forest in the Rodeo-Chediski Fire area. We seek your assistance in providing positive policy direction and funding to continue this rehabilitation to prevent further irreparable damage to our lands and to ensure that recovery becomes a reality for our forest lands.

But we understand that recovery for us will mean much more than stabilization and rehabilitation for our land, although we consider this very important. I often remark to others that at the core, recovery from this fire is really centered on recovery for our people. Recovery means assistance and strengthening for our families, for our wage earners, and for our communities which have been impacted by this fire. In turn, planning for future forest management and forest health must also recognize that we as people are a part of these forests and our plans for the protection and betterment of our forests must involve us.

For the White Mountain Apache people, our lands, our forests are part of us. We live, we work and we spend our days in our forests. We undertake our activities in our forests, including our logging, in an integrated approach. We use our staff and our years of experience to plan and carry out our forest activities in fulfillment of our environmental regulations and standards to ensure protection and health for our watersheds, our pasture lands and our forests. We also recognize that to bring about recovery we will need help. We have identified critical projects for our Tribe which we think can help expand our economic base, still using our precious natural resources, but geared to alternatives to commercial timber activity.

With the loss of so many thousands of acres of prime commercial forest, we realize that the Tribe must further expand its economy to make up for the loss of harvestable timber. With our streams and lakes and mountains in a state known for its dry deserts, we recognize that outdoor tourism, fishing, camping, and even skiing are to play a vital role in our economic future. As part of our recovery, we hope to obtain funding and assistance to further enhance our outdoor recreation programs. In turn, we recognize that the dollars spent for these programs, whether it be sport fishing or camping or skiing, brings a tremendous boost to our hard-pressed rural economy in eastern Arizona. The White Mountain Apache Tribe is already well-known and well-regarded for its tourism and outdoor recreation opportunities. We hope to expand these programs to further strengthen our regional economy and open a door to our future in cooperation with our regional partners.

However, we do not mean to overlook a key historic cornerstone of our economy, as represented by our commercial forests. We also seek funding and assistance to better adapt our timber processing and manufacturing to meet the new resource base of smaller trees, and unfortunately, of salvage trees impacted by fire or the growing threat in Arizona of bark beetle. It is our firm belief that without a viable economic base to the activities we wish to undertake in managing and perpetuating our forests, even the best of efforts will be short-lived and will not produce the results we wish for our offspring and future generations. We need your assistance and cooperation to help identify new products, and new markets, and new policies to utilize the overabundance of small diameter trees which crowd our forest lands so that we may create the jobs and the economic engine to fund and perpetuate a long-term, sustainable and healthy forestry program in our region and to protect our forests from future catastrophic wildfires.

As I stated, ultimately, recovery from our fire and planning for our forest health must be tied to people. For that reason, we seek the assistance and the funding to be able to return our people to work after the devastating setback from the fire and to build a model which links our activities at the workplace with the future growth and health of our forests. Those are not unattainable goals, in fact, we believe that this approach is the only real viable solution to the future welfare of our Tribal lands and the forest lands throughout our region.

From the date of the fire last summer, we have met many obstacles and roadblocks to our plans for recovery. Expectations of assistance and aid have been met with only limited responses and, more often than not, denials. But we are patient people and we are committed to our long-term recovery. We are a proud people, and we are proud citizens of the United States. We have every confidence that we will reach our goals and we will achieve our vision for sustenance for our economy, a positive future for our people, and restoring our land to a balance of health, but we need your help. We lost much more than trees and forests from this fire. We have suffered a loss of a part of ourselves and our heritage, and we ask you for help. Without it, my people and my land will continue to suffer, and for all of us, the question becomes not if, but when will another fire of even greater magnitude erupt to destroy more of our precious lands. We look to your assistance in bringing our recovery goals to reality, and we pledge our commitment of cooperation in channeling the resources of our people and their enthusiasm toward the health, the recovery, and the welfare of our great lands.

Thank-you very much.

####